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# Toyota to recall 3.8 million vehicles

# Los Angeles Times

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Toyota Motor Corp. said it would recall 3.8 million vehicles sold in the United States as it tries to resolve concerns that floor mats in those cars and trucks could cause their gas pedals to become stuck, leading to uncontrollable acceleration.

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The recall will be the largest ever in the U.S. for the Japanese carmaker, whose reputation for quality has been dinged by other recalls in recent years. The recall will cover eight models of Toyota and Lexus vehicles, including various years of Camrys, Priuses and Tundra pickups.

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Last month, a San Diego man and three passengers were killed in a high-speed crash of a Lexus ES sedan. Before the crash, the driver called 911 to report that the gas pedal was stuck and that the car was going 120 mph. Investigators are trying to determine whether a floor mat played a role in the accident.

Toyota said Tuesday that it had been receiving complaints from consumers about uncontrollable acceleration because of floor mat entrapment dating to 2004, but was moved to act in part because of the San Diego accident and the publicity it has received.

"Obviously the tragic accident in San Diego was certainly an eye-opener for us," said Irv Miller, a Toyota spokesman. "We're trying to raise floor mat awareness."

Toyota said it had been in discussions with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration for the last week to 10 days on the matter and that it developed the current consumer advisory in consultation with the agency.

"This is an urgent matter," said U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, who oversees the highway

safety agency. "For everyone's sake, we strongly urge owners of these vehicles to remove mats or other obstacles that could lead to unintended acceleration."

The automaker said it has engineers working on fixing the problem and, once it is resolved, the company will issue the recall notice to owners and cover any costs involved in repairs or the replacement of floor mats.

In the meantime, Toyota is asking owners of the eight models to remove their driver's-side floor mats. If they choose not to, they should at least confirm that they have the correct factory floor mats in the vehicle and that they are properly installed, a spokesman said.

The San Diego accident, which took place Aug. 28, is being investigated by the San Diego County Sheriff's Department. Toyota said it didn't know what the probe had found so far and couldn't say conclusively whether it was caused by the floor mat.

The driver in the incident was in a Lexus ES sedan loaner he had received from a dealer, Toyota said Tuesday. The vehicle had incorrectly installed all-weather floor mats, the company said.

Auto safety researcher Sean Kane said his group was reviewing more than 1,500 reports of unintended acceleration involving Toyota and Lexus vehicles since 2000. Although many of the incidents appeared related to the floor mats, Kane said, there may have been other causes, such as electronic control malfunctions.

"This is one of those issues that's going to take some time to unfold," said Kane, founder of Safety Research & Strategies Inc., a Rehoboth, Mass., automotive safety advocacy group.

Toyota noted that the floor mat problem -- caused when the mat slides over the accelerator pedal, preventing it from returning to normal position when the driver's foot is removed -- had been experienced by other manufacturers.

During the 1980s, German automaker Audi issued a series of recalls involving unexpected acceleration problems in some of its cars. Investigators concluded that in many cases, the problem was caused when the driver stepped on the wrong pedal.

The planned recall is the latest black eye for Toyota, which has built itself into the world's biggest carmaker partly on a reputation for building long-lasting, reliable cars.

In the last two years, Toyota has recalled more than 4 million vehicles worldwide because of problems with brakes, window controls, fuel systems, steering and seat belts.

In addition, in September 2007, Toyota recalled "all-weather" floor mats used in 2007 Lexus ES 350 and Camry vehicles in response to complaints that they could slip forward and trap the accelerator pedal. That year, Consumer Reports magazine said it would no longer automatically give Toyota vehicles its coveted "recommended" stamp because of reliability problems.

Toyota recommended a series of measures that could be taken in the event that a floor mat does jam the pedal.

If possible, Toyota said, a driver who is experiencing unintended acceleration because of the mat should try to dislodge it from the gas pedal and then pull over and stop the vehicle.

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If the floor mat can't be dislodged, the driver should shift the car into neutral and press the brake pedal down firmly with both feet. Toyota said its brakes are designed to be able to bring vehicles to a full stop, even when the motor is at full throttle.

If that doesn't work, the driver should shut off the engine by turning the key to the "ACC" position. The driver shouldn't remove the key because that action will lock the steering wheel.

In vehicles such as the Prius that are equipped with an engine start-stop button instead of an ignition key, the driver must depress the button continuously for three seconds to turn off the engine. Do not tap the button, the automaker warned.

Some drivers have complained that the neutral gear can be hard to find on some Lexus shifters, Kane said, especially during emergencies.

"Once these vehicles have an unintended acceleration episode, it can be extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to find a way to shut the car down," he said.

[martin.zimmerman@](mailto:martin.zimmerman@latimes.com)

[latimes.com](http://latimes.com)

[ken.bensinger@latimes.com](mailto:ken.bensinger@latimes.com)

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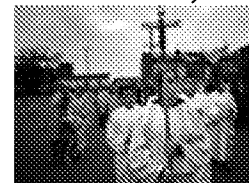
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